

Message Text

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PAGE 01 PARIS 03178 01 OF 03 011953Z
ACTION EUR-12

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LIMITED OFFICIAL USE SECTION 01 OF 03 PARIS 03178

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PAGE 02 PARIS 03178 01 OF 03 011953Z

SUBJECT: ELECTIONS 1978: A PRIMER

SUMMARY. OF THE 31 MILLION FRENCHMEN AND WOMEN ELIGIBLE TO VOTE ON MARCH 12 AND 19 FOR A NEW CHAMBER OF DEPUTIES, ABOUT 25 MILLION OF THEM ARE EXPECTED TO EXERCISE THEIR RIGHTS IN WHAT COULD BE THE MOST IMPORTANT LEGISLATIVE ELECTION IN 20 YEARS. THE ELECTIONS ARE

CONSIDERED A TOSS-UP AT THE PRESENT TIME, WITH THE WINNER PROBABLY SQUEAKING BY WITH LESS THAN A 20-SEAT MARGIN. OF THE 491 INDIVIDUAL RACES, ABOUT 100 WILL BE ESPECIALLY CLOSE AND WILL DECIDE THE OVERALL WINNER. MANY OF THESE RACES WILL BE DECIDED ON WHAT MAY BE CALLED TECHNICAL POINTS: THE TRANSFER OF VOTES BETWEEN THE FIRST AND SECOND ROUNDS, THE ECOLOGY AND OTHER SMALL PARTY VOTES, ABSTENTIONS, ETC. THIS MESSAGE IS INTENDED TO EXPLAIN IN A SIMPLIFIED FASHION TO THE GENERAL READER, RATHER THAN TO THE INVETERATE FRENCH WATCHER, SOME OF THESE ELECTION MECHANICS AND THEIR RELATIONSHIPS TO POLITICAL FACTORS. END SUMMARY.

1. A FRENCH PECULIARITY -- TWO ROUNDS OF VOTING: EACH VOTING DISTRICT ELECTS ONE DEPUTY, EITHER BY AN ABSOLUTE MAJORITY OF THOSE VOTING IN THE FIRST ROUND (AS LONG AS THE NUMBER OF VOTERS EQUALS AT LEAST ONE-FOURTH OF THOSE REGISTERED) OR BY AT LEAST A PLURALITY ON THE SECOND ROUND ONE WEEK LATER. THE IDEA BEHIND A TWO-ROUND VOTE WAS TO COMBINE A DEMOCRATIC INSTINCT WITH PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR FINDING A PARLIAMENTARY MAJORITY. IT IS DESIGNED TO AFFORD THE GREATEST CHOICE POSSIBLE FOR POLITICAL EXPRESSION ON THE FIRST ROUND AND, AFTER HAVING GIVEN FULL VENT TO THIS EXERCISE IN FREE EXPRESSION, WHITTLE THE CHOICE DOWN TO REASONABLE PROPORTIONS SO AS TO BE ABLE TO PICK A CLEAR WINNER ON THE SECOND LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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PAGE 03 PARIS 03178 01 OF 03 011953Z

ROUND. A CANDIDATE MUST WIN 12.5 PERCENT OF THOSE REGISTERED (ABOUT 18 PERCENT OF THOSE VOTING) ON THE FIRST ROUND TO QUALIFY FOR THE SECOND ROUND. THUS, THERE CAN BE MORE THAN TWO CANDIDATES ON THE SECOND ROUND -- NOT THE CASE IN A PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION.

2. A MAJOR CONSEQUENCE OF THIS VOTING PROCEDURE IS THAT IT HAS BECOME VIRTUALLY IMPOSSIBLE FOR ANY PARTY TO WIN A SUBSTANTIAL NUMBER OF SEATS IN THE ASSEMBLY UNLESS IT POOLS ITS SECOND ROUND VOTES WITH THOSE OF OTHER PARTIES. THIS VOTE POOLING TACTIC, KNOWN AS DESISTEMENT, RESULTS IN A VOTING COALITION TO PROVIDE UNIFIED SUPPORT TO A COMMON CANDIDATE ON THE SECOND ROUND -- USUALLY THE CANDIDATE WHO GAINED THE MOST VOTES ON THE FIRST ROUND -- IN AN ATTEMPT TO PROVIDE HIM THE PLURALITY REQUIRED FOR VICTORY. WITHOUT DESISTEMENT, TWO OR MORE CANDIDATES FROM ONE SIDE OR THE OTHER OF THE POLITICAL SPECTRUM WOULD OBVIOUSLY SPLIT THE AVAILABLE VOTES, THUS ALLOWING A LESSER BUT MORE UNIFIED OPPOSITION TO PREVAIL, E.G., PS 30 PERCENT, PCF 30 PERCENT, RPR 40 PERCENT.

3. THUS, SECOND-ROUND VOTING DISCIPLINE (THE WILLING-
NESS OF SUPPORTERS OF THE WITHDRAWING CANDIDATE TO VOTE
FOR THE REPRESENTATIVE OF THE COALITION) WILL BE ONE
OF THE CRUCIAL FACTORS IN THE MARCH ELECTIONS. ASIDE
FROM ISOLATED CASES WHERE THERE HAS TRADITIONALLY BEEN
BAD BLOOD BETWEEN CENTRISTS AND GAULLISTS OR WHERE
PERSONAL FEUDS DOMINATE, THERE SHOULD BE NO PROBLEM FOR
MAJORITY LOSERS TO TRANSFER THEIR VOTES TO THE WINNERS
OF ITS PRIMARIES (WHICH WILL TAKE PLACE IN ABOUT THREE-

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PAGE 01 PARIS 03178 02 OF 03 012020Z
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LIMITED OFFICIAL USE SECTION 02 OF 03 PARIS 03178

LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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PAGE 02 PARIS 03178 02 OF 03 012020Z

FOURTHS OF THE DISTRICTS). CENTRISTS AND GISCARDIANS CAN BE EXPECTED TO VOTE FOR THE GAULLIST CANDIDATE ON THE SECOND ROUND AT THE RATE OF ABOUT 80 - 90 PERCENT, WITH THE SAME BEING TRUE FOR GAULLIST LOYALTY TOWARD ITS PARTNERS. OBSERVERS ARE LESS SURE ABOUT DISCIPLINE IN THE LEFT, WHERE PRIMARIES WILL TAKE PLACE BETWEEN THE PS AND PCF IN VIRTUALLY ALL DISTRICTS. DISCIPLINE IN THE LEFT WAS EXCELLENT IN THE 1976 CANTONAL AND IN THE 1977 MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS, AS WELL AS IN LEGISLATIVE BY-ELECTIONS IN THE LAST FEW YEARS. BUT THE POLEMIC IN THE LEFT SINCE LAST SUMMER AND PCF LEADER MARCHAIS' REFUSAL TO COMMIT HIMSELF ON THIS ISSUE HAS LEFT SOME DOUBT ABOUT EVENTUAL PCF SUPPORT FOR PS CANDIDATES. MODELS HAVE BEEN RUN TO SHOW THAT 80 PERCENT DISCIPLINE BY THE PCF AND 60 PERCENT BY THE PS WOULD BE ENOUGH TO CARRY THE DAY FOR THE LEFT. BUT GIVEN 491 SEPARATE RACES WITH MANY IMPORTANT VARIABLES, SUCH A NATIONAL ESTIMATE CANNOT BE ACCURATE ENOUGH IN WHAT PROMISES TO BE A VERY CLOSE RACE. TO COMPLICATE MATTERS FURTHER, IT IS NOT AT ALL SURE THAT THE VARIOUS ELECTORATES WILL BLINDLY FOLLOW THE DECISION OF PARTY HEADQUARTERS TO SUPPORT OR NOT SUPPORT THEIR PARTNERS; NOR IS IT SURE THAT THE PCF WILL EVEN ISSUE CLEAR INSTRUCTIONS ON HOW TO VOTE.

4. THE DISTRICTS: THERE ARE 491 VOTING DISTRICTS, OF WHICH 474 ARE IN METROPOLITAN FRANCE AND 17 IN THE OVERSEAS DEPARTMENTS AND TERRITORIES. A TYPICAL DISTRICT HAS BETWEEN 75,000 - 80,000 POTENTIAL VOTERS, BUT DISTRICTS VARY WIDELY IN POPULATION. THEIR BOUNDARIES WERE DRAWN UP FOR THE MOST PART AT THE START OF THE FIFTH REPUBLIC IN 1958, AND IN THEORY HAS BEEN MODIFIED PERIODICALLY TO KEEP UP WITH DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGES, MOST RECENTLY AFTER THE 1975 CENSUS. BUT MODIFICATIONS HAVE

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PAGE 03 PARIS 03178 02 OF 03 012020Z

FALLEN BEHIND DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGES, TO THE POINT WHERE THE COMMUNIST DEPUTY IN THE THIRD ESSONNE DISTRICT IN THE PARIS RED BELT REPRESENTS 170,000 VOTERS WHILE THE REPUBLICAN PARTY DEPUTY FROM A RURAL DISTRICT IN LOZERE

IN CENTRAL FRANCE REPRESENTS ONLY 30,000 VOTERS.

5. THIS POPULATION AND VOTER DISTRIBUTION, PLUS SUBSEQUENT GERRYMANDERING BY THE GOF, EXPLAINS WHY THE LEFT NEEDS SOMETHING OVER 50 PERCENT OF THE VOTE TO WIN 50 PERCENT OF THE SEATS IN THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY. IT ALSO DEMONSTRATES WHY WINNING ADDITIONAL VOTES (FOR INSTANCE BY THE PCF IN THE ESSONNE OR BY THE MAJORITY IN OTHER, TRADITIONALLY CONSERVATIVE AREAS) DO NOT NECESSARILY HELP THE PARTICULAR PARTY WIN MORE SEATS. THESE ANOMALIES OF THE SINGLE UNIT VOTING SYSTEM FURNISH ARGUMENTS TO THE LEFT AND CENTRIST PARTIES WHICH ADVOCATE A CHANGE TO PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION.

6. UNTIL RECENT YEARS THE ELECTORATE IN THE DIFFERENT DISTRICTS WAS FAIRLY STABLE, AND THE CONTEST WAS USUALLY DECIDED ON THE BASIS OF THE POPULARITY AND PERSONAL QUALITIES OF THE CANDIDATES. CERTAIN REGIONS WERE TRADITIONALLY CONSERVATIVE (PARIS, BRITTANY, ALSACE-LORRAINE, CENTER), SOCIALIST (NORTH, RHONE VALLEY, MARSEILLE), RADICAL (SOUTHWEST), COMMUNIST (PARIS SUBURBS, NORTH, SOUTH), OR CENTRIST (EAST). THIS IS STILL THE CASE IN THE SENSE THAT MOST OF THESE PARTIES MAINTAIN THEIR STRONGEST POSITION IN THEIR TRADITIONAL BASTIONS, BUT THESE BASTIONS ARE NOW REDUCED IN SIZE AND ARE BEING RAIDED BY THE OTHER PARTIES. FOR THE GREAT MAJORITY OF THE COUNTRY GEOGRAPHICALLY, IT IS OPEN SEASON FOR ALL THE PARTIES.

7. THIS CHASE FOR VOTES HAS TURNED INTO A FARCIICAL DISPLAY OF POOR ADMINISTRATION, IF NOT ILLEGALITY, WITH RESPECT TO THE 700,000 FRENCH VOTERS RESIDENT IN FOREIGN LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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PAGE 04 PARIS 03178 02 OF 03 012020Z

COUNTRIES. THE LEFT HAS ACCUSED (WITH APPARENTLY SOME REASON) THE GOF AND MAJORITY PARTIES OF ORGANIZING THIS VOTE TO COME TO THE RESCUE OF THE THREATENED DISTRICTS IN THE METROPOLE. WHAT THIS DISPUTE PROVES MOST OF ALL IS THE CLOSENESS OF MANY RACES AND THE IMPORTANCE OF THESE NOT-RESIDENT FRENCH VOTERS (GISCARD, FOR EXAMPLE, WON THE PRESIDENCY BY ONLY 425,000 VOTES).

8. THE ELECTORATE: NOW YOUNGER (18 YEAR-OLD VOTES SINCE 1974), BETTER-INFORMED, MORE WHITE COLLAR AND SUBURBAN, THE ELECTORATE HAS CHANGED DRAMATICALLY SINCE 1958, AND SINCE 1970 MOST OF THESE CHANGES HAVE WORKED TO THE FAVOR OF THE SOCIALIST PARTY. AN ESTIMATED 70 - 80 PERCENT OF THE ELECTORATE HAS ALREADY DECIDED HOW IT

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PAGE 01 PARIS 03178 03 OF 03 012039Z
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LIMITED OFFICIAL USE SECTION 03 OF 03 PARIS 03178

LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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PAGE 02 PARIS 03178 03 OF 03 012039Z

WILL VOTE; THIS PRECOCIOUS INCLINATION IS PARTICULARLY MARKED AMONG PCF AND RPR VOTERS. SINCE THE VOTER TURN-OUT WILL PROBABLY RANGE BETWEEN 80 AND 85 PERCENT IN EACH ROUND, ONE MIGHT BE LED TO BELIEVE THAT ONLY 5 TO 15 PERCENT OF THE VOTERS REMAIN UNDECIDED AT THIS POINT AND SUBJECT TO INFLUENCE DURING THE CAMPAIGN. HOWEVER, GIVEN THE EXISTENCE OF TWO ROUNDS OF VOTING, THOSE WHO ABSTAIN ON THE FIRST ROUND ARE NOT NECESSARILY THE SAME AS THOSE WHO ABSTAIN ON THE SECOND ROUND. VOTERS WHOSE CANDIDATES ARE ELIMINATED ON THE FIRST ROUND AND WHO ARE NOT ATTRACTED TO THE SECOND ROUND CANDIDATES OFTEN ABSTAIN; WHILE VOTERS WHO ABSTAIN ON THE FIRST ROUND MAY WELL BE MOBILIZED ON THE NEXT ROUND, PRECISELY BECAUSE OF THE FIRST-ROUND RESULTS. THIS MIXED VOTER REACTION ADDS ANOTHER ELEMENT OF UNPREDICTABILITY TO ANY SPECULATION OVER THE FINAL RESULTS.

9. THE TWO-ROUND SYSTEM WREAKS HAVOC ON ELECTORAL PREDICTIONS PARTICULARLY IN CLOSE RACES. LAYING ASIDE PROBLEMS SUCH AS THE IMPACT OF ISSUES OF IMPORTANCE EITHER NATIONALLY AND/OR REGIONALLY, INTRA AND INTER-PARTY POLITICS, QUESTIONS OF PERSONALITY, ETC., WHICH WILL AFFECT THE OUTCOME OF THE ELECTION AND WHICH HAVE BEEN AND WILL BE DISCUSSED IN OTHER CABLES, THE MECHANICS OF THE SYSTEM ALONE CREATE A GREAT AMOUNT OF UNCERTAINTY AS TO THE RESULTS.

-- THE FRENCHMAN DOES NOT NECESSARILY VOTE ON BOTH ROUNDS FOR THE SAME REASONS, I.E., HE MAY REACT ACCORDING TO HIS HEART ON THE FIRST, WHILE FAVORING HIS HEAD (OR POCKETBOOK) ON THE SECOND. FOR THOSE VOTERS ON THE BORDERLINE BETWEEN TWO COALITIONS, THE ELIMINATION OF A CANDIDATE FAVORED FOR SOME PERSONAL OR LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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PAGE 03 PARIS 03178 03 OF 03 012039Z

LOCAL REASON MAY EVEN CAUSE THEM TO SWITCH THEIR VOTES TO THE OTHER SIDE IN THE FINAL ROUND.

-- A PARTY OR PARTIES HAVING A CANDIDATE QUALIFIED FOR THE SECOND ROUND MAY NOT JOIN A COALITION, THUS LEAVING SEVERAL CANDIDATES IN THE SECOND ROUND AND ALLOWING VICTORY BY A SIMPLE PLURALITY WHICH BY NO MEANS APPROACHES A MAJORITY.
-- A LEGISLATIVE VOTING DISTRICT IS NOT IDENTICAL WITH THOSE OF THE CANTON OR MUNICIPALITY. MOST TAKE IN RURAL AS WELL AS URBAN AREAS (A MARKED DIFFERENCE FROM MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS), THUS ADDING A GREATER WEIGHT TO THE CONSERVATIVE VOTE OF THE COUNTRYSIDE.

- UNDER THE FRENCH SYSTEM THE POLITICAL PARTY SELECTS ITS CANDIDATE TO RUN IN ANY GIVEN DISTRICT WITH NO LEGAL REQUIREMENTS FOR RESIDENCE. THUS A PARTY MAY PLACE ONE OF ITS LEADERS IN A DISTRICT (PARACHUTAGE) WITH WHICH HE HAS HAD LITTLE PRIOR CONTACT, SIMPLY BECAUSE IT NEEDS THE POWER OF A NATIONAL FIGURE TO WIN IN THE DISTRICT OR BECAUSE THE DISTRICT IS CONSIDERED "SAFE", I.E., A SURE BET. THE RESPONSE OF LOCAL VOTERS TO THIS TACTIC IS SOMETIMES DIFFICULT TO PREDICT.
- THE FACT THAT CANDIDATES (AND DEPUTIES) HOLD LOCAL OFFICE (OR A SERIES OF THEM AT DIFFERENT LEVELS OF LOCAL OR REGIONAL GOVERNMENT) ALSO AFFECTS THEIR ABILITY TO OBTAIN VOTES BASED ON THE NATURE OF THEIR SUPPORT (OR LACK OF IT) AT THE LOCAL LEVEL AND THEIR USE OF PATRONAGE.

10. CONCLUSION: EACH PARTY OR COALITION ATTEMPTS TO USE THESE QUIRKS OF THE SYSTEM TO ITS ADVANTAGE IN ELECTORAL STRATEGY. ANALYSIS OF THESE AND OTHER FAC-LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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PAGE 04 PARIS 03178 03 OF 03 012039Z

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